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## EXCELENTE ZONA SOCIAL

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In July of this year I spent two days in a camp of displaced peasants in the swamps of northern Colombia where the mighty Magdalena River spills out. I was accompanied by two Colombians, Juan Felipe Garcia, a professor of law, Pablo, his assistant who kept track of our expenses, and Lily Hibberd, an Australian artist who had never been to Latin America. On the first night of our return trip to Bogota we stayed at a hotel in the heavily militarized town of Agua Chica called Don Pepe's Posada, located, according to its sign, in an excelente zona social.

Jimmy has it worked out. Just as the ancient city of Alexandria was to the poet Cavafy, so Bogota is to him. Actually Jimmy lives in self-imposed exile, having grown up in New York City. He attended Columbia University in the 1960s but dropped out searching for a more meaningful life, first in western Ireland, then Colombia where he found home. So it seems fair to say he inhabits in his soul two cities. Me too, I want to say, but my other city is not Bogota but an agribusiness town called Puerto Tejada and beyond that a territory extending over southwest Colombia; from the mangrove swamps of the Pacific over the cordilleras to the foothills of the Andes falling into the Amazon. I guess we could continue; Faulkner and Yoknapatawphaw county, Hardy and Wessex, Garcia Marquez and Macondo, George Elliot and Middlesmarch . . . But these are fictional names for real places whereas for Jimmy and me while the place is real enough, our writing less so. He

aims at what he thinks of as the surreal 1990s into 2010 when Colombia was a mix of soap opera, film noir, and horror film, now on “pause,” while I myself zig-zag between ultrarealism and irony seeking a way out through fable and allegory. In either case the life rendered is largely unlivable and the violence unspeakable. Yet the monstrous slips away into the banal everyday of low-grade paranoia punctuated by language as exaggerated as that which such language tries in vain to tell you about.

Cavafy has a poem he wrote in 1896:

*Confusion*

My soul, in the middle of the night,  
is confused and paralyzed. Outside:  
its life comes into being outside itself  
And it awaits the improbable dawn.  
And I await, am worn down, and am bored,  
even I who am in it or with it.

On a balcony on a brand new high-rise facing the inky blackness of the mountains rising sheer in our face, an elegant young law professor, whisky in hand, expounds on the history of the new constitution of 1991. But each story requires another to explain it. We get locked into a labyrinth of interconnecting, incomplete, stories in a sort of hysteria of history with the native being egged on by the outsider for the sake of the newcomer. It is cold under these stars with all this glass and shiny steel around us. Twenty-two stories below thread the lights of traffic like a string of pearls. The new constitution came about largely because of the student movement, he says, a bunch of 18-year-olds, many from the Jesuit university. The M-19 guerrilla came aboard later, as did the FARC who were ready to sign on but the government couldn't tolerate that so it bombed them from the air. The government needs the guerrilla, the enemy within, the anti-Christ, their best ally, better even than the United States. The students had a stimulating conversation with the leader of the M-19 when he signed on. What was meant to be a five minute formality extended to three hours of animated conversation. Next day he was assassinated. The stars are fiercely alive at this height although technically dead. It's just that it takes so long for their light to reach us through this cold air. A burly ex-M-19 *guerrillero* looks on but does not say much. He seems strangely absent, now a nonbeing on the wrong side of history, out of place in these shimmering towers. He belongs to the impenetrable blackness of the past where history becomes someone else's story.



Faulkner not only told stories but also told the language, something that in his case at least might have been easier because he worked in a circumscribed area that was his territory if not his home. His novels were autoethnographic and the exotic lay more with his readers and his use of language moving back and forth across that thin membrane where inner and outer worlds meet and dissolve. He saw words glued to what they meant and then he unglued them so they soared. He wrote with the limitless power of what I came to call in Colombia “multiple realities” whereby each person sees the same thing differently, like *As I Lay Dying* in which he had separate chapters for the thoughts of each member of the dead woman’s family. Susan Willis told me that Faulkner wanted the book printed such that each person’s chapter would have a separate color. In my town in Colombia this multiplicity of reality became apparent to me under three conditions: stories of origins of local saints, stories as to how corpses on roads into town got to be there, and when I started to write about these things.

Sometimes when you write field notes time stands still and an image takes its place. On occasions the image is tactile. Just about the softest thing I ever touched was powdered coca leaf prepared by the Huitoto Indians of the Igaraparaná and Caraparaná affluents of the Putumayo River, which itself runs into the Amazon. Jimmy had some coca powder in the fridge but said it was a little old to *mambear*, meaning put into your mouth with lime and hold it there a while like a wad of tobacco. It’s good for writing, he says, but makes you want to chain-smoke cigarettes. But hey! Anything for writing. His kid Rafael made a phony Nobel Prize for Literature certificate and hung it on the wall above his desk. Feeling the coca powder with my finger and thumb was beautiful, like the softest velvet, resonating with the subtlety of its color between light green and grey, like stardust, if you know what I mean. Dust, that’s for sure, the dust so fine it’s where substance gives way to immateriality. It takes the Indians ages to make, I believe, toasting it then mixing with ash, then sorting with deft hands using green leaves as funnels. These are the hands of alchemists, pharmacists of the rain forest.

Juan Alvaro who teaches anthropology in a university deep in the Amazon has a plastic bag of much fresher stuff than Jimmy’s and uses it quite a bit. He hangs out with Huitotos and speaks their language. I have memories of him in his glassed-in penthouse in downtown Bogota, surrounded by all manner of exotic plants such as a giant San Pedro cactus from northern Peru. His house is like a watchtower, tilting to one side with a spiral staircase inside and a loopy old dog whose claws make scratchy noises as she clambers up and down. Modernized apartments stare at us from across the way as the trendy new-style Colombians dream of hedge funds and

banking. He is sucking his finger dipped in concentrated tobacco juice at the same time as he chews on the coca powder, like Huitoto men do when they gather in a circle to talk and tell stories. He keeps the tobacco juice in a small bottle shaped like a penis. It is extremely strong. His voice is soft, like the coca powder. The ink black tobacco juice drips down either side of his mouth as he speaks, giving him black fangs. His mouth—organ of speech—has become transformed as does therefore his face. It is no longer a mouth but more like a cave dripping with fungi or decaying organic materials, dark green and black. No wonder he often seems a little high and drifting, but that could be because of what I take to be his mission. He wants us to gather close, *mambear*, suck tobacco juice, and have each person in turn tell their story. Years back I was told about the importance Huitotos attach to stories, the stories that abetted white conquest, and the stories of the rubber boom atrocities, which, so it was said, only sorcerers listen to so as to gain power to kill people. I think Juan Alvaro is continuing this chain of storytelling as that which has the power to change the world. He wants us to change. At least a little. He wants us to live a little like Huitotos and nudge the world and especially its sense of words and language and what it is to tell a story and inhabit multiple realities. He is trying to live both like a forest Indian and as your not so regular middle-class professor intellectual. His decades of experience and his modesty make this a reality. In his quiet way he inhabits a space every bit as fictive, every bit as real, as do Faulkner and Cavafy, only he is in two places at once and has the language and drugs to make it work.

Having a place resonates with having a territory but what if you live emotionally in two places? What sort of territory is that? And what about not having a territory or, rather, feeling you have one but you have been displaced from it so it's more a phantom territory like a phantom limb? This has happened throughout history as with the Jews who, after 2,000 years' absence, nevertheless claim they have an indisputable claim to a territory so they feel fine pushing Palestinians off, Palestinians who were actually working the land and have a continuous, working, relationship with it presumably before the Jews fled Egypt. The Jewish sense of territory is fraught and mythic, now sustained at gun point, which is different to the mythic properties of what Jimmy is claiming for Cavafy in relation to Alexandria, or as regard to Jimmy himself in connection with Bogota.

It is said that in Colombia some four million poor country people have been forced in the past 20 years to flee from the land they cultivated and regarded as theirs. This forced displacement has been especially severe in northern Colombia where first cattle—the armed tank of the large landowners—and now biofuels lay

2 waste the land and the people who once farmed it. But just as the new type of large  
 3 landowner moves to monocropping biofuels, cultivating African Palm or sugar  
 4 cane, depleting local resources and creating plantations, so there is an opposite and  
 5 opposed development in which displaced or resistant peasants have come up with  
 6 the idea of “territory,” meaning their territory based not on commodity values but  
 7 on use value bound to histories of possession based on use, on closeness to the  
 8 land and now something new or newly articulated, namely conscious care for the  
 9 sustainability of the environment. This is the direction or tendency of struggle now  
 10 with echoes worldwide. It is similar to what Marx predicted for the proletariat, that  
 11 in their coming together in ever larger factories, workers would create socialism.  
 12 But it didn’t happen. Yet something like this is occurring in agriculture, at least  
 13 in the third world, wherein the means of production, thought of as territory and  
 14 history, is to be treasured as an end in itself.

15 Powered by a small outboard engine our “Johnson”—the term for a dugout  
 16 canoe with small outboard motor—pushes through brilliantly colored flowers—  
 17 white, purple, and a bloody red—that spread like a floating carpet over the surface  
 18 of the water. Great white herons stand solitary on one leg in haughty disdain, flying  
 19 off slowly at the last minute as we approach, stretching open their enormous white  
 20 wings like fans against the bright green. They are extremely clumsy and extremely  
 21 graceful, catching themselves as they seem to fall. Black ducks skid across the clear  
 22 brown waters. After flooding there are plenty of fish in the swamps. *Mojarra*. I got  
 23 to know the taste well. This enormous area of wilderness, of swamps that go on  
 24 forever, is one of the world’s great and least known paradises. What a fate to plant  
 25 it in African Palm row after row for diesel fuel.

26 My law professor friend Juan Felipe Garcia has been here in these swamps of  
 27 northern Colombia 15 times, usually accompanied by his law professor colleague  
 28 Roberto Vidal. It takes two days of travel from Bogota by plane, bus, taxi, launch,  
 29 motorbike, and “Johnson.” They work pro bono. On either side of Juan Felipe’s  
 30 office in the Jesuit university in Bogota are law professors who work as paid  
 31 consultants for large landowners. “It was always the Jesuit way,” he explains. “To  
 32 help the poor while at the same time sustain the system.” His mission is to get  
 33 the land restored to the 120 families displaced first by a drug lord, Jesus Emilio  
 34 Escobar, a relative of the infamous Pablo Escobar, laundering money and growing  
 35 coca. In the early 1990s in its efforts to curtail drugs the state claimed the land,  
 36 which thereafter lay abandoned and the peasants occupied it claiming it should  
 37 revert to them. Paramilitaries from the *Bloque Central* forced them off in 2003.  
 38 But the peasants returned. Then Jesus Emilio returned in 2006 with an army and

forced them off again. One of the wealthiest men in Santa Marta—site of Joseph Conrad’s novel *Nostromo* located far away on the Caribbean coast—bought the property or the rights to plant African Palm from Jesus Emilio in 2006, and since then African Palm cultivation has proceeded apace, alongside the plantations of the sons of ex-president Uribe who had the Medal of Freedom bestowed on his scrawny chest by George W Bush for his fight against terrorists.

One of the curious aspects here is that the peasants rarely held title to the land they farmed and if bought out by the rich it was not the land but the so-called *mejoras* or improvements that were sold. You have to ask yourself, first, why the peasants did not acquire title, and, second, see in this not merely neglect, ignorance, or lack of means to deal with bureaucracy or pay a lawyer, but also a clash of civilizations, one based on writing and the state, the other based on knowing the land and claiming it through working it.

Juan Felipe and Roberto have won the first legal battle. The case went to the top court in the land, the Constitutional Court, which held that the use of riot police to force the peasants off the land, for the third time in the past 30 years, was illegal. Now the decision as to whom can claim ownership rests with a government appointed institute until recently stacked with the paramilitary friends of ex-president Uribe.

Pictures of the confrontation with the riot police who look as scary as the cayman alligators of the swamps who could serve as archetypes for these ultra-modern guardians of the state with their curious ribbed exoskeletal armor. It took at least an hour for the ring of 60 police to slowly advance, step by step, toward the hacienda building to make the peasants leave. It is strange to see such police in the swamps, far from the city, which is their customary habitat, just as it is now strange to have the peasants hand me these photographs and be propelled back in time to this decisive moment. Both the riot police in their cayman-like gear and the photographs compress time, abutting the prehistoric life of the swamp with the leviathan of the modern state.

In the village of Buenos Aires on the river before I got to this camp I had seen a video of a similar confrontation showing the dark-skinned lawyer of the *palmeros*—as the African palm plantation owners are known—with his bodyguards berating the peasants with all manner of high flown legalese to make them leave. I was with Misael’s family. Every now and then someone watching the video with me would make a comment. The past is not what it used to be, not with video cameras on hand.

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FIGURE 1.

A neurologically disturbed mute girl, perhaps like this since birth, aged about 18, would walk back and forth and occasionally come in and glance at the video, wringing her twisted hands, her arms knotted with tension. She would sit and lie in a sand pit made especially for her so she could carve ephemeral shapes back and forth. Outside on the one street constituting the village, two small girls aged ten or so were making castles or mansions in the sand, decorated with flowers. A small boy whose mother took off unannounced one day and abandoned her family so as to go the United States was nursing a broken arm. He had been taken by “Johnson” all the way downstream to El Banco and from there by ambulance all the way to Santa Marta to have it set and put in plaster. An epic journey.

The peasants first came to this region with their burros in the 1920s exploring the tributaries and winding rivulets of the Magdalena. Living in these vast swamps of mud and floating plants, the peasants became amphibious, adapted to the rise and fall of the waters as had the Indians long before them. I have even seen suggestion of an “amphibious mode of production” in Orlando Fals-Borda’s 1978 three-volume study. *Historia doble de la costa*, an experimental historical ethnography, which, amphibious in its own right, puts travelers’ tales, anecdotal observations, and phenomenological impressions on the left hand page, and social sciencey stuff on the right hand page—hence *historia doble*. It is incredible how dated the right hand

side has become, testimony to our need for theory and how boring it can become, while the left hand side seems to increase its power over time like a good wine.

Something else stands out with this amphibiousness that is every bit as exciting, every bit as enchanting, as the romantic idea of *nomadism*, and that is the role in history of people who live in or close to swamps and changing water levels at the mouths of great rivers. Much of world history includes such folk and much of world history and now its impending disasters can be summed up not only as the clearing of the world's forests but also by drainage and building walls against rivers.

To live in the swamp bespeaks enormous adaptability and working with the environment, not against it as we find in such graphic detail with the dykes along the Mississippi and the wreckage caused not by Katrina, per se, but as a result of building up the mouth of that mighty river with oil refineries and cities based on assumptions as to the advantage if not necessity of stable and fixed homes and property in land and buildings.

What appears now as a devastating blow to amphibiousness and what it implies for living with, and not against, nature, is African Palm, which, unlike other crops, can withstand flooding and does well in swampland while destroying it. Huge swathes of Colombia and the tropics fall victim to this hunger for biofuel. Clearing the swampland for these plantations is said to release enormous amounts of carbon dioxide such that the net effect is to enhance global warming.

What is also lost is the everyday peasant and indigenous knowledge of living in harmony with water and floods, something that will prove increasingly necessary as sea levels rise along with the increased use of biofuels to power motor vehicles.

Juan Felipe brings official maps. He wants the peasants to check and annotate them with historical referents and, second, discuss a map of utopia showing how the territory would be used if they were able to get it back, complete with new artificial waterways for transport, a swamp reserve of forest, replanting trees along with land set aside for private plots of rice, yucca, and cattle. The peasants call him "profe" as in professor, a term of endearment and respect.

Everyone but the children gather. Don Efrain starts a prayer. It is early morning and still cool. "We have to create a new language," says Juan Felipe. "The *palmeros* have theirs, and we need to show the world an alternate model." Then he asks, "Who recalls the founding of the village of Buenos Aires?" A man steps forth, puts his elbows on the table while standing and starts a lengthy genealogy. Don Efrain writes it all down. The witness has his back to the audience and is speaking very softly. Then another elderly man lists all the houses, one by one. It seems tedious to me but there are guffaws and rippling mirth. Misael asks four elderly men to



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FIGURE 2.

name the houses in the *calle atras*. We are off on a journey through time, threading names and events onto a new map of swampland territory.

Don Efrain aged around 60 finds it hard to walk because of a misplaced injection in his buttocks when he was a kid. In a physically taxing world this is a problem but he somehow compensates by being the scribe of this little community living in jeopardy, squatting on the land they consider theirs but now being planted in African Palm. He keeps a daily journal and has drawn his own map.

What did he do before the troubles started, I wonder, when perhaps a chronicler was not necessary, and why does he do this? I see one entry in the journal, which begins with "Today was a day full of promise . . ." It is I suppose no surprise that he has tremendous knowledge of the region as expressed in his map and ensuing discussions about it. His map accentuates the cemetery, the crops, and the "beaches" which I guess are the fertile levees along the rivers, which, if memory serves me right, are like common lands and cannot be alienated. Efrain's

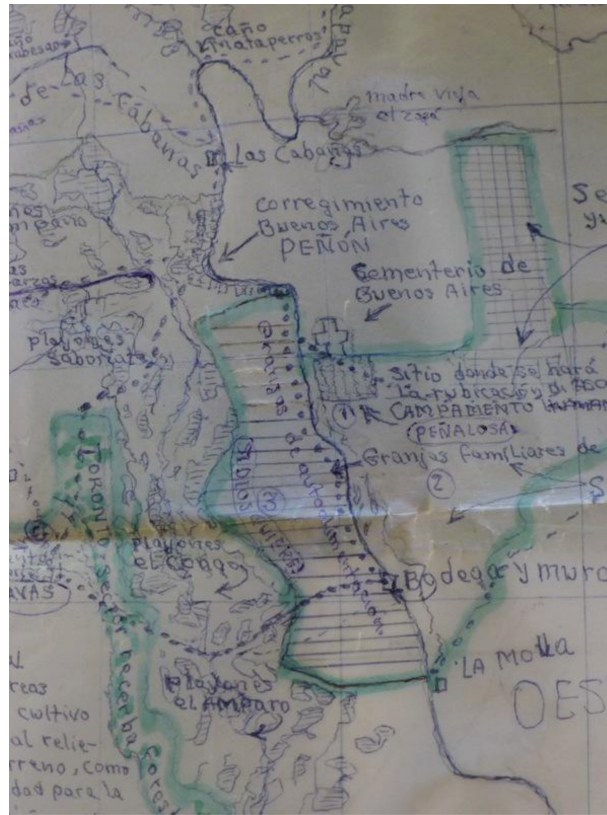
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FIGURE 3.

map is as much a text as a visual diagram, more a mimesis than an abstract diagram in that it strives to bring out the use, meaning, history, and utopic future of the land and settlements. His map is messy and differs a great deal from the official maps on account of its abundance of information and something like love or at least intimacy.

The maps are placed on a crude table chest high and the men cluster around this, then drift away after an hour, leaving the discussion to a handful of elders and the scribe. There are no women, other than those young and middle aged women tending great tubs of fish and yucca. As the sun gathers force, excitement around the maps wanes. Heat rises under the black plastic ceiling.

Two kids four years old are playing in the dirt to one side of us making their own sort of map, an imaginary road system for their cars, two old cans of tuna. Why tuna? Aren't there loads of fish here? The label on the underpants is visible. It says "American Rangers." Kids, pigs, and dogs roll around together in spiraling



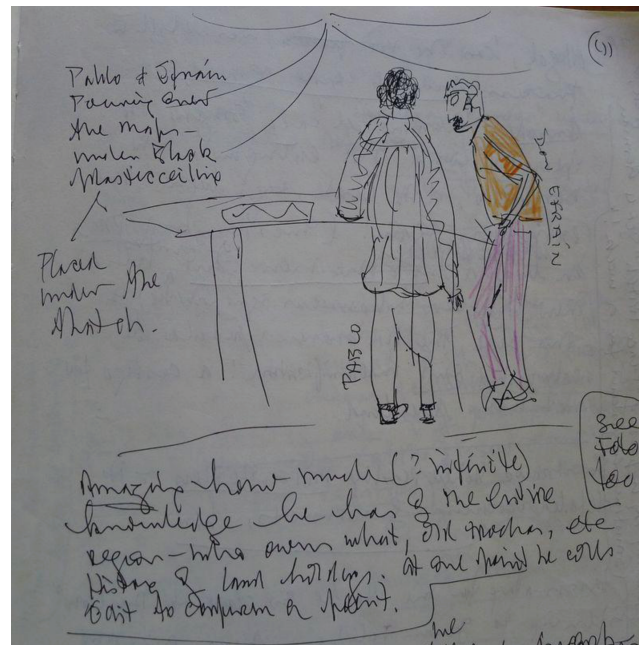
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FIGURE 4.

confusion. The pond in front of us is covered with thick green slime and at night there are so many frogs croaking you can barely think.

Much of the week the peasants live in a village on the edge of a river called the *brazuelo de Papayal*, which runs into the Magdalena. But so as to keep their moral if not legal right to territory alive, they built this tent city two hours walk away (at their speed of walking) right next to the hacienda building built by the *palmeros* or African Palm cultivators who dispute their claims. They have divided into three such that every two to three days a new group stays in the tent city and the others remain in the village by the river. I see a young man and woman walking back through the swamp carrying their belongings in a large plastic trash bag. No LL Bean or North Face wilderness gear for these folk, the real denizens of the wilderness, physical and political.

At sunset the peasants form a guard along the fence dividing this black plastic encampment from the hacienda building in which three or four employees of the African Palm growers reside. I look for a place to take a shit and find there is none or, rather, everywhere is possible, and am pointed vaguely to a field full of young African palms, like fat pineapples, in neat rows. It is hard to walk anywhere because of the mud. Once I had to get hauled out when my calf-high rubber boots stuck in

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FIGURE 5.

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FIGURE 6.

the mud. It is satisfying—indeed a sublimely revolutionary act, is it not?—to shit in their palm field as the sun sets over the ridge. I am told that a guard made of Indians all the way from Cauca in the south of the country have been here armed with nothing but their staves to provide support and there is a group of Swiss who do the same thing frequently, “bearing witness,” as they say. In my cynical way I ask why not have three German sanitary engineers here for a week to make some toilets? I’ll take that over people bearing witness any time.

Looking out over the squat African Palms I sit with six of the younger men sprawled on a piece of farm equipment quietly watching the colors in the sky. The

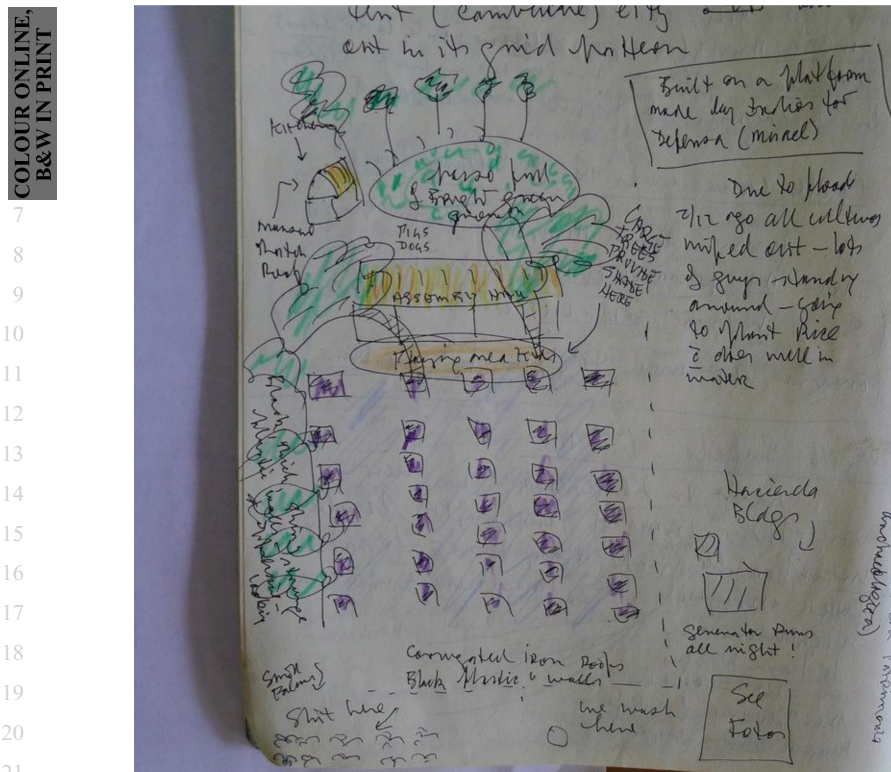


FIGURE 7.

mood has shifted from the practical to the poetic, like shitting in the palm field. Alexander is here, aged 29. I call him "the poet," He has no job, he says, and has never worked. His father allowed him to finish high school and that he did aged 23. How can I understand his not working? The valleys in the far off ridges of what I take to be the *Serranía* of San Lucas fill with a golden haze while along the hill tops the gold forms a thin ribbon running along the bluish green of the hills.

Not a word passes between us. Triggered by the hysterically ascending price for gold, the *serranía* is now subject to a gold craze with miners using mercury, which gets into the waterways here, a man told me. But not much, he adds. The *serranía* is also the home for the guerrilla, first the ELN and then the FARC. All that is there, on the horizon. And now the whole sky is flecked, purple and red. Meanwhile the employees of the hacienda switch on an electric generator, which makes a terrible racket. Their lights will glare the night long making our sleep difficult. It is all so strange our camp and their camp, cheek by jowl, our camp of black plastic sheeting, theirs a solid looking hacienda building with a powerful back

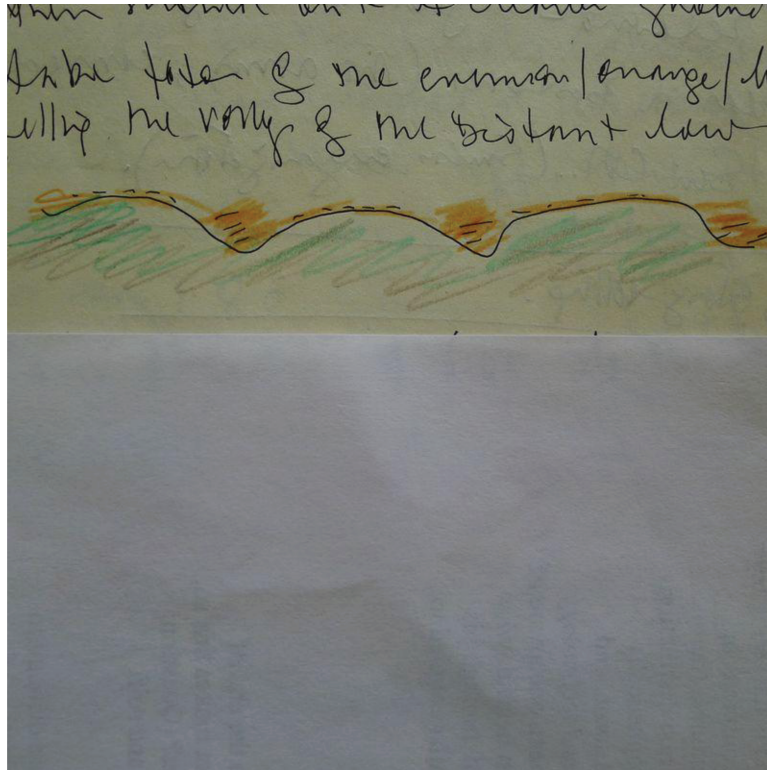
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FIGURE 8.

hoe as its guardian. It gets stranger still, as two of the men hired by the hacienda are accomplished accordion players who join us on our return canoe trip, complete with *tambor* and *aguardiente*. Best of pals.

As the darkness gathers I decide to copy Lily who has been accompanied by a group of women to a bathing place by the side of the African Palms. I walk through the mud with a flashlight accompanied by a one-armed young man named José who appears out of nowhere. We reach a small pond the size of a bath tub four feet down a muddy slope, which has crude, slippery steps, set into it. He holds my hand in his good hand. I slip as I descend. His grip is firm and comforting. It is pitch black. He wears swimming trunks and nothing else. With infinite care I take off one sandal, then another. Then he hands me a container for scooping up the muddy water so as to douse myself. Out of fear of offending him I do not strip completely naked. Then like a crab I make my way up again. This one armed gentle man who appeared out of nowhere has become my guardian angel.



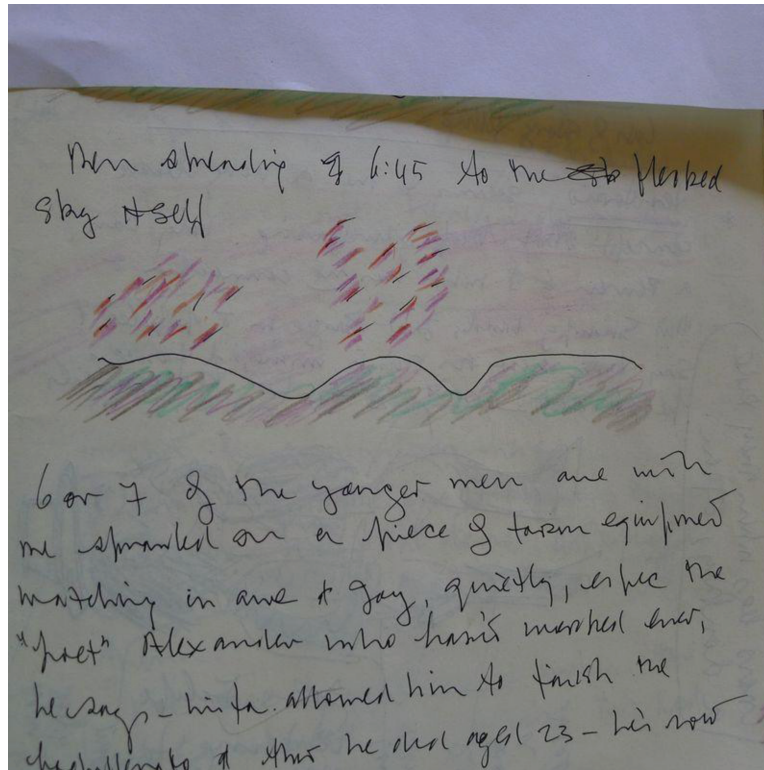
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FIGURE 9.

Only 30 percent of the people are behind this movement to claim territory, Juan Felipe tells me, and they are mainly middle aged and elderly. What's up with the rest? I wonder. Coming to this place in the "Johnson" took about five hours as the motor refused to start. The current was with us. We drifted as the *motorista*, sweating profusely, tried again and again to yank the motor into action. Up front sang the balladeer. He answers my questions with songs of violence and violation, of betrayal by the "black Judas" who swore a deposition in the state capital, Cartagena, that the peasants had not been forcibly displaced, this same Judas who now has a salaried job with the African Palm owners. Sung in a high falsetto, like Woody Guthrie, these *vallenatos* sung to a Hohner accordion (always a Hohner; always from the same town in Germany), are famous throughout the north of Colombia as songs of protest as much as of love and betrayal. The hours pass. The sun beats down. The great white herons spread their wings like the swan enrapturing Leda as we float downstream through the floating verdure. He sings of the paramilitaries and the terror they create, chopping up bodies and heaving them into the river we

are floating on with its vivid flowers. He stops singing for a moment and tells me how, when swimming in this river, he felt an arm and then a hand clutching at his throat. I don't believe a word of it. Why exaggerate like this? Did I hear right? Then he starts singing again. We stop to fix the motor at a bunch of houses made of packed mud. A stout schoolteacher joins us. Her blood pressure fell suddenly and she was taken here for medical attention. The conversation turns once again to the violent and bizarre, stage two, you might say, of an ongoing dialogue as the canoe, now moving briskly, raises a fine spray in a glistening arc overhead. What would the Huitotos say about this? Are we like the sorcerers, gathering tales of atrocity with which to empower ourselves? What is our humanism, really? Why do we gorge ourselves on these stories? What of Walter Benjamin and his claim—at once dubious and convincing—that storytelling is a dead art, especially in times of war? Why do they put the bodies in the river? I ask. Because they won't let them be buried, she replies. This takes time to sink in. Life is important, but I get the feeling burial is more so. Don't Vico and Bataille see in burial the first sign of culture, the first sign of being human? Therefore not to bury and, even more, to refuse burial, strikes at the heart of life, human life that is, what separates whatever it is we designate "human" from nonhuman, meaning not only animal but also the inhuman. Yet the inhuman is every bit as religious, every bit as sacred, as the pious rites that help move the corpse from its frightening negative state to that of hallowed ground. Is it not this arc of sanctification of the corpse that lies at the center of its disposal not in the graveyard but in the river? A body is the ultimate territory and a chopped up corpse adrift in the river is the absolute denial of such territory, the deepest possible exile of the soul. Thus, does deterritorialization achieve its most definitive state of nonbeing. Could this be why the counterforce claiming territory as mythical power is now every day ascendant in Colombia, after two decades of paramilitary violence aimed at dismembering both land and body?

The territory of the body, that is the corpse, is not lost on Vladimir either. He is an ex-paramilitary who deserted through fear and, of all things, because he hated oatmeal for breakfast. I can't stand *avena*, he explains. He was recruited in Caicedonia in the Valle and was taken to a training school lasting 45 days near Libano in Tolima. He spares no detail. They cut open the body of a guerrilla fighter, stuffed it with cocaine, and drove it to Medellin in a hearse. Another time he was working on a dairy farm in Antioquia and had to walk somewhere at three in the morning. He saw headlights of three pick-up trucks in a stream and then he saw two bodies, one being cut to pieces with a belt around the man's mouth to stop him

2 screaming. The other man was dead and his body was being packed with what most  
3 likely was cocaine. Vladimir crept past. Walking up the hill he heard the sound of  
4 a motorbike of *alto cylindrage* coming down the hill, *muy suave*. The driver stopped  
5 and asked him if he'd seen anything down at the stream? Oh! No! He replied. Are  
6 you sure? Of course I'm sure.

7 The tent city, like the hacienda building next to it, is built on a platform about  
8 300 feet square and 30 inches high so as to resist floodwaters and I am told it was  
9 used for dwellings and cultivation in pre-Colombian times. It is marvelous to be  
10 on this platform continuing a tradition 1,000 or more years old, yet so modest, a  
11 mere raising of levels. Misael brings out two stone cutting tools he has discovered  
12 there about five inches long. They are surprisingly heavy. It is strange to live in this  
13 gridwork of black plastic homes erected on pre-Colombian earthworks with heavy  
14 stone tools scattered around. I recommend it to anyone in search of a territory in  
15 this modern age; the permanence of the earth below, itself an artifact, sustaining  
16 the impermanence of the black glistening plastic shelters above.

17 It must seem frivolous if I pause to consider my fieldwork notebook as territory  
18 in this sense too, but then is not the notebook as much our means of production as  
19 is the watery land the peasants work as use value? Might this be even more so as  
20 regard to the phantom land that, now displaced, is filled with turbulence and hope  
21 of redemption every bit as glowing as those ridges of the *Serranía de San Lucas* with  
22 the sky now flecking purple and red? And just as land as territory is a lot more than  
23 means to an end, can we not say the same about the fieldwork notebook, which,  
24 quickly, becomes an end in itself, a veritable fetish cherished as a work not only of  
25 documentation but also of secret signs and even art?

26 I had been thinking along these lines for several years ever since I published in  
27 2003 a diary of two weeks in a Colombian town in 2001 taken over by hired killers  
28 identified by many as paramilitaries. In reorganizing my diary of those two weeks so  
29 as to create a book, I realized that an ethnographic notebook or diary can mean very  
30 different things and be written in a great variety of ways such that in the final analysis  
31 the very notions of the Self to whom one purportedly writes dissolves no less than  
32 the meaning of writing and representation along with—and this is crucial—the  
33 events and thoughts depicted. A diary thereby matches the fragmented and multiple  
34 nature of social reality, analogous to the terror I experienced in Colombia. I came  
35 across a note in my notebook of this trip into the swamp that read: "These trips  
36 become as much a trip into one's past and into one's being as they are journeys  
37 into the unknown. What effort must be expended by travelers and anthropologists  
38 to ignore this."

Aspects of this came to light for me when a student at CalArts directed me many years back toward Brion Gysin and William Burrough's 1961 scrapbooks based on what Gysin called the cut up principle. With that I got to thinking about fieldwork notebooks as having the potential—at least the potential—to be considered as modernist art objects, fetishes, talismans, and, like any true collection, according to Benjamin, as magic encyclopedias with some divinatory power.

Here Walter Benjamin's radio stories for children and his concepts of *colportage* and the *denkbilden* are relevant. The *colportage* strategy or disposition was to mix walking the city, taking drugs, and cinematic montage, into a mode of perception and representation. The *Denkbilden* or "thought figures"—as hit on in his two summers in Ibiza, 1932 and 1933—combined surrealist juxtapositions of experience with philosophical observations or aphorisms coupled to combinations and permutations of ethnography, recording of stories, drug experiences, recording of dreams, and making up one's own stories. He had already tried something like this in his small book of 1928 entitled *One Way Street*, but the trips to what he thought of as an "outpost" of Europe, namely Ibiza, brought this to a head.

All this suggests—like Clifford and Marcus's (1986) *Writing Culture* and, before that Marcus and Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986)—that fieldwork is inseparable from writing work and that the notebook has its own riches of form and content that cannot and should not be seen as mere stepping stones to the polished end-product of a book or article. Writing culture suggests to me (1) allowing writing to take up the burden of theory, (2) practice an art of thought-images, (3) create culture as well as describe and analyze. Thus, this little sketch I call "Excelente zona social."

If there is something absurd if not insulting about an ethnography based on two days and two nights, with some additional material based on notes the days prior, is it not also the case that first impressions are generally more vivid than subsequent ones? What are we to make of this Proustian observation? And what of the responsibility to oneself as much as one's hosts to put something of those impressions out into the world, together with the responsibility to get it right? Most of all, what is that urge that compels one to put order into experience, as Graham Greene once described his novels? I understand that *Power and the Glory* is based on a mere six weeks travel in southern Mexico yet it reads as if he had spent years. But if he had, maybe his senses would have dulled.

To this it should be noted that what happens when notes are "written up" is that what I call "afterthoughts" kick in. By afterthoughts I mean secondary elaborations



that arise on top of the original notes, photographs, and drawings. Through stops, starts, and sudden swerves, the original is pulled into a wider landscape. To reread and to rewrite is to tug at the memories buried therein as well as engage with the gaps, questions, connections, conundrums, and big ideas that lie latent and in turn generate more of the same. In essence this talk today is exactly that, a ten page afterthought that has, with the passage of three weeks, slipped away from its moorings while preserving the imprimatur if not the character of the original.

I feel impelled to ask, therefore, if anthropology has sold itself short in conforming to the idea that its main vehicle of expression is an academic book or journal article? This is not a plea for exact reproduction of the fieldwork notebook but, rather, a plea for following its forms and its mix of private and public in what can only be called, as in cinema, a “dissolve” or “fade out” that captures ephemeral realities, the check and bluff of life.

At the end of the day one is left with an image of a cocaine rich man with a check book and a lawyer turning up one day in the swamp saying it’s all his now, recorded in the deed book of properties in far-off Cartagena, capital of the state, a walled port built over two centuries by slaves from Africa baptized by the Jesuits in the cathedral of San Pedro Claver. Other rich men follow to plant African Palm in neat rows for diesel fuel to power the endless stream of trucks running north and south night and day along the highway connecting Barranquilla, the port at the mouth of the Magdalena, with the interior. The trucks are beautifully illuminated with row after row of twinkling lights and full of mystery. The *palmeros* build roads that interrupt the flow of the swamps. A songster sings of feeling a chopped off arm and hand clutching at his throat while he swims in the river. The more the men with the check books take, however, those men who could never even set foot in the swamp, the more they provoke an idea of territory in place of alienable land, territory meaning a place with a history that, depending on your outlook, is evidenced by Indian earthworks going way back in time, or black plastic villages where now the map is being rewritten as memory opens like the fan of the great white wings of the heron against the green of the swamp.

—the end

### ABSTRACT

*Writing culture suggests (1) allowing writing to take up the burden of theory, (2) practice Walter Benjamin’s idea of *denkbilden*, or thought-images, (3) create culture as well as describe and analyze. Thus, this little sketch I call “Excelente zona social.”*

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